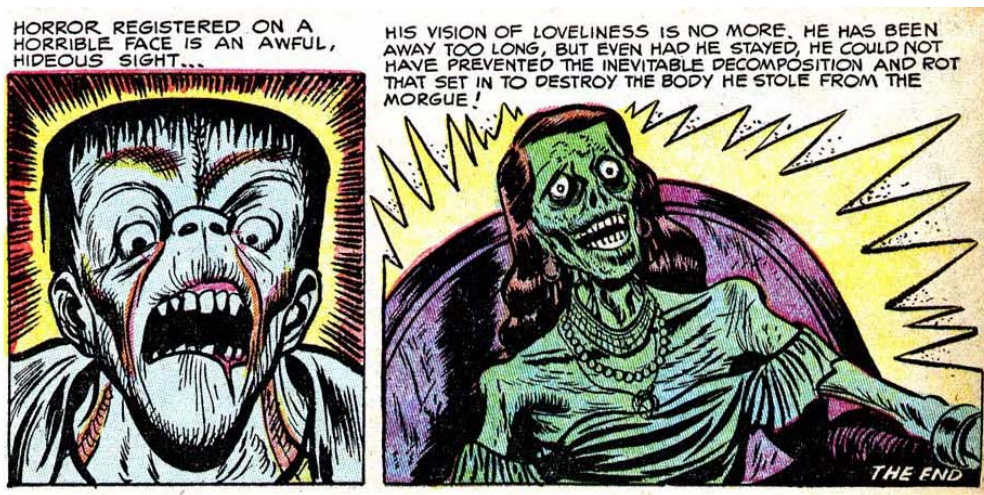


OP-EDS

# LIBERTARIANISM: NO INFANTILE DISORDER

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The faces of horror comics in 1954 were as alarming to authority figures as Facebook is in 2021. [Public domain.](#)

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat could use a refresher on Freudo-Marxist psychiatrists.

Douthat chides libertarians — or at least “the kind of libertarian who identifies forever with his 13-year-old self” — for taking a laissez-faire attitude to “a novel, obviously addictive technology that might well be associated with depression and self-harm” (“[Instagram Is Adult Entertainment](#),” September 30).

Douthat refers to social media websites, but he should take a closer look at “the people who panicked over the moral effects of comic books” before dismissing a parallel.

*Seduction of the Innocent* author Fredric Wertham was sure that the shift of comics from the funny pages to funnybooks was causing psychological harm to young readers, a diagnosis drawn not from old-fashioned prudery but the Frankfurt School’s suspicion of commercial culture. Wertham cited the Progressive Era’s forays against reckless robber barons in his efforts to clean up crime comics. Ironically, such regulation allowed cartelized industries to get away with lower safety standards (and higher profits) than possible under the pressure of market competition.

By the 1960s, *Mad* magazine was spreading as a primer for rebellious adolescents after the Comics Code Authority forced its publisher to discontinue horror comics like *Tales from the Crypt* and *The Haunt of Fear*. Meanwhile, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm introduced American audiences to a British import that became an icon of the youth counterculture. While the Beatles were proving that rock and roll would outlast Elvis Presley leaving for the Army, Fromm highlighted how “the idea of education without force” was being put into practice at the alternative school Summerhill.

Fromm insisted to those who saw an excess of permissiveness in pedagogy that, just as in the realm of politics, “it is not that authority has disappeared, nor even that it has lost in strength, but that it has been transformed from the overt authority of force to the anonymous authority of persuasion and suggestion.” Freedom did not fail when it was genuine.

Douthat’s insistence that the state save social life from social media likewise ignores Fromm’s insight, drawn from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, that social organization can only be a social benefit if its “associations are free and spontaneous, and not state imposed.” What Fromm called Proudhon’s “drastic condemnation of the principle of authority and hierarchy” as “the prime cause of all disorders and ills of society” should serve as a warning to those who see it as the cure.

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